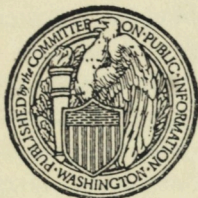


What Really Matters



*A letter by an unnamed writer, quoted
by Rev. Joseph H. Odell in an article in
the Atlantic Monthly for February, 1918*

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION

The Secretary of State
The Secretary of War
The Secretary of the Navy
George Creel

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What Really Matters

THE world is getting down to brass tacks. (I wonder who invented that phrase and what its original significance was.) We are cutting out all sorts of non-essentials. Daniel Willard of the War Board has emphasized the need of eliminating non-essentials if we are to win the war, but he meant physical non-essentials. We must cut out mental and spiritual non-essentials too; and we are beginning to do it to a surprising and encouraging degree. As a matter of fact, the trend was in that direction before the war; the tendency has long been toward a worldwide standardization, a universal merging or pooling in the interests of efficiency.

The one question now is autocracy versus democracy. Nothing else matters for the moment.

Therefore our prejudices must go; we must give up old preferences; we cannot think provincially any longer. The doctrines we laboriously taught must be foregone. What difference does it make what the political economies say? What difference does it make what the party platforms of the

last generation have declared? Every hidden hypocrisy is now revealed; every contention that was based on selfishness stands exposed; every programme of personal or factional or neighborhood greed that we clothed in a disguise of wholesomeness, which almost deceived even ourselves, disappears.

Autocracy or democracy—there is our stark alternative.

We cared for certain foods and did not care for others. No matter; we shall eat what is set before us.

We had our preferences in raiment. We shall take what we can get.

“The best government is that which governs least.” But now the best government is the government which lends the most effective aid to the grand alliance against Germany.

We argued the relative merits and ethics of direct and indirect taxation. Now the only question is how to raise the money we need most easily and promptly.

Old obstacles break down everywhere. Nothing is sacred now—except Our Cause. Nothing can be sure of its standing in our hearts and souls except the future of human liberty. We may go back to our prejudices by and by; there is perhaps no reason why we should not when there is time for such non-essentials.

The Government has always heretofore maintained an attitude of aloofness from its thrifty citizens; it offered them nothing in the way of investments. Now its attitude toward them is one urgent welcome; a child with twenty-five cents is free to become a creditor of the august Federal régime.

Never was the Government so close to its people; never, perhaps, in another sense, so far from them. But, either way, old conceptions of government are broken down.

The trend is all in the direction of a weakening of tradition and form. What is the Constitution in this greatest of all crises? If it serves, we shall revere it as it is; if it does not serve, we shall amend it to suit the new duty of the new occasion.

Nothing matters but the winning of the war.

We must forego our old social prejudices. We have very largely foregone them. We may like our little circle about the hearth as much as ever, and we are entitled to it; but we must not let it interfere for a moment with our larger social, national, or international obligations.

The day of the Pilgrim Fathers is over. Like it or not, we have got to face it. New England is what we would have called till lately an alien corner of the country. It is a New Europe rather than a New England

now. If we pine for an untainted Anglo-Saxon survival, we shall have to seek it among the unspoiled mountaineers of North Carolina and Tennessee. . . .

Republican? Democrat? Prohibitionist or Socialist? Mere unmeaning names just now. Even American is too small for the world-emergency except as it is a synonym for liberty and democracy.

There are 168 religious denominations in the United States. . . . There is one religious need, one religious aspiration; it is the desire to simplify and intensify man's relations with the Eternal Power.

Wake up America! Slough off the non-essentials. Get down to brass tacks. Live simply, think sincerely, give all you have of mind and strength to the one task before which every other task pales.

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